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In Conversation With Robert Valantin

[Robert Valantin](#), the co-editor of [Development and the Information Age](#), discusses the book's background and its contribution to the debate on the role of information technology in the developing world. Topics covered include:

- [Development and the Information Age — short but sweet](#)
- [The 1996 workshop on IT and development](#)
- [Four scenarios explained](#)
- [Contentious issues](#)
- [Opinions on the scenario most likely to emerge](#)
- [Closing the information gap](#)
- [New issues](#)
- [The book's role](#)

The first thing you notice about the book *Development and the Information Age* is its length. At 60 pages, it's slim -- yet the issues it deals with are so complex. Why did you decide to keep it short?

One of the intentions of designing the publication in this form was to have something brief, easily understandable, and easily consumable. We decided to follow a tradition in the scenario- building field that tries to capture the essence of the results and make them interesting and accessible to as wide an audience as possible. We did have an earlier draft that was more like "he said, she said, they said" but ultimately we decided that it would not be of interest.

Why?

Partly because we're trying to address policy. Policymakers and decision-makers are very busy and they don't have a lot of time to digest huge masses of material. Unfortunately, it often turns out that neither do the analysts they hire to do that digestion for them. So we try to do some pre-digestion and put down the essence.

The book has its origins in a workshop that was a joint activity of the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development and IDRC. How did the workshop evolve?

The UN Commission was looking at the area of information technology and development as part of a two-year cycle of issues that it examines. The question for the UN Commission was what does information technology mean for developing countries and the UN system and what issues should they be thinking about. IDRC has been involved in information and development for its entire 27 year history and so this seemed a very good partnership.

Everyone was saying "what does information technology mean for the future?" We realized that there were

diverse answers, depending on whom you talked to. Computer salesmen have one, usually overly optimistic view. Other people are very down on technology — they're almost Luddites — saying that it tears the world apart. We wanted to find some way of encompassing both those views. After quite some debate — the notion of doing this exercise was seen by some to be a little bit speculative — we decided it would be a very useful contribution to thinking.

In the book, you commented on how the location of the workshop influenced the scenario- building exercise. Where was it held?

It was in an old castle in Scotland that was built in the 11th or 12th century. It turned out to be a very interesting environment. When you're thinking about the future, doing it in a place that's been around for 800 years helps put things in perspective. You realize that even though information technology changes very rapidly, people and institutions do not. I think it helped to keep us from becoming too wide-eyed and bushy tailed. You had a group of people with about 20 lap tops and only one modern phone line. Trying to get our modems to work reminded us of some of the constraints that are practical issues in developing countries. It helped to ground us.

The book sets out four scenarios for the future development of information technology. Can you briefly describe them?

The scenarios embrace quite a wide spectrum. In the *Networld* scenario, information technology is having all of the wonderful positive effects that it can, and countries and people are responding in ways that are constructive. At the other extreme, you have a very pessimistic view which we call the *March of Follies*. Greed, fragmentation, and power politics dominate and information technology is used more as a tool of oppression à la 1984 rather than as something that empowers people. There are two other scenarios in between. One is called *Netblobs*, which posits some of the positive aspects of information technology. The notion is that different geographic parts of the world get together to make some of those positive things happen in their region. Another one is called *Cargo Cult* in which there are some positive aspects but developing countries are responding in a passive way. You may recall the old cargo cults where the islanders in the South Pacific saw wonderful things coming out of airplanes. And so again, rather than taking control of the technology, countries are using it reasonably well for development but they are at the mercy of larger forces.

How are the scenarios designed to be used?

Scenarios by their very nature are not definitive. They are neither right nor wrong. They offer possibilities, options, and ideas. Therefore, what you want to do is get people thinking about them. Some people may react quite strongly to them and say "this one is absolute hooey." Or, yes, this resonates with the way I see things developing. It is quite a personal interaction that one has with the scenarios, just as one has personal views on the way the world is likely to evolve.

The whole book is supposed to be a set of teasers that forces people to think about the different ways that the world may evolve and what information technology means in that context. We also try to adopt an informal narrative style in presenting the scenarios themselves.

Yes, there are a lot of imaginative examples of future developments, such as the creation of the Greenpeace spin-off -- Greenbyte -- that fights for electronic equity. Development literature is not exactly replete with catchy references.

That is a feature of this rather arcane business of scenarios, particularly if you are trying to capture the interest of senior policy people. I also think it's important because it adds a degree of playfulness, which makes you realize that none of the statements in there are definitive statements. But I won't say that it makes it less serious.

When you were developing the scenarios at the workshop, were people at loggerheads with each

other over contentious issues? Did sparks fly?

Oh yes, lots of sparks flew. There are several reasons sparks fly. One was that we were trying to condense a process that normally takes significantly longer than two or three days. For many of us, it was an instant education.

The second reason for sparks is that we had a diverse group of good people with strongly held views and opinions. And many of them didn't hesitate to express those -- which was part of the point. As a result, because of the time pressure and the desire to not simply come up with a lot of speculation but to try to organize the scenario development, we pressed very hard to come up with something. And I think we did.

Was there any agreement on which scenario is most likely to emerge in the future?

We haven't actually expressed a view as to which one is more likely or less likely per se. We didn't sit there and try to say the group now agrees that this is the way the world is likely to evolve. That was not the intention.

What about your personal view?

One always tends to go in the middle somewhere. I don't think the world is going to hell in a handcart quite yet, although there are days when I do. Nor do I think that it's all very rosy. I guess I am a little bit of a pessimist when it comes to motivations. Information technology is a very big business — this is a multi-trillion dollar industry so the stakes are very high. People tend to do things that are in their particular interests.

I do not necessarily see a perfectly benign future because of or despite information technology. Having said that, there are all sorts of pockets. There are groups of people who are trying to do good things and those who are not. In a way, Netblocs conveys a kind of chunkiness and diversity. Of the four scenarios, I think that Netblocs may represent where we are going right now. I think it models what is happening geopolitically with the Asia Pacific Rim as a grouping, the OECD countries and the North American/South American hemispheric bloc.

Are there examples of countries that currently fit this scenario?

Some developing countries have a strong, active response to information technology, like the so-called tiger economies in Asia and some Latin American countries. I also see signs that in some of the poor developing countries, they are realizing that they cannot be left behind. For example, in Africa, ministers of social and economic planning are realizing that information technology can have a major impact on the way they deliver services with very limited resources. So I do see signs that countries are interested and in some cases very successful -- in some cases so successful that they are competing with the North.

Some of the most interesting discussion, in my view, came up in the development of the Netbloc scenario. We had people there from some of these developing countries that are taking quite a pro-active approach to the use of information technology in their own economies. One could see the dawning light in their eyes as we were having this discussion that they were actually doing this on a day-to-day basis.

The book highlights the paradoxical nature of information technology — it can be both a threat and a boon to developing countries. But do you think that ultimately, it is contributing to the closing of the information gap between the haves and the have-nots?

Yes I do. Certainly information is more easily accessible. But it's not perfect. Even having an Internet connection doesn't mean that the information there is necessarily accessible -- look at language constraints for example. But generally, there is greater availability and ultimately accessibility. The technology is becoming easier to master. More groups are getting involved. The whole point of the technology is that no one controls all of the content. Any group can use technology to put up its own information and talk to

other people. You can have specialized interest groups that get together to create a global information network on a shoestring whereas before, that was the purview of national governments, UN agencies and large multinationals.

On the other hand, there is a potentially dangerous trend and that is the commercialization of information technology and the Internet. Many people are trying to make money out of it. A lot of the public investment that went into research and development of networks 20 years ago is drying up and this is being handed over to the commercial sector. This has positive effects because it generates economic return and new business for both North and South. It leads to systems that are more sustainable because they don't depend upon a handout. And the private sector and the economy are quite good at filling niches. If there is a demand, even if its density is thin, someone may come up with a way to meet the demand. The down side is that those without money can easily get left out. For some groups, even a low cost can be prohibitive. Therefore, issues of equity of access to information technology have to be looked at.

Is the book a compendium of current thinking on these kinds issues or does it stake out new ground?

It's certainly not a compendium -- It's a particular slice of the world. I personally find it convenient because it simplifies things a lot. It certainly doesn't encompass all the issues.

Are they new? Well, it's very hard to find new anything under the sun, in a sense. If you're a reader of science fiction, some of the elements of these scenarios are found in books by William Gibson. But we hadn't found work that looked at information technology scenarios, particularly with the view of what this means for developing countries. Certainly people have done work on what it means for their particular company. You can be sure that IBM and the other large multinationals are doing all sorts of scenario exercises on how they can develop their products. But this was relatively new in terms of using this tool in development

The amazing thing is that even some of the more outlandish positions are, if you think about it, quite feasible. We had some discussions on the question of a "bit tax." Of course, nobody wants new taxes. But if you are talking about public investment in development, governments have to raise revenues. We had some debates on that and we believe that this issue is likely to come on the public agenda. As more things become globalized, the powers of national governments to tax them are becoming more and more difficult. I remember reading several years ago that in Silicon Valley in California, municipalities were having difficulty because people were shopping on the Internet instead of locally and the local tax base was being eroded. And so they didn't have a way of collecting enough money. So this is an issue that's highly problematic.

What do you see as the book's role?

Developing countries are realizing that all this new-fangled information technology is in fact relevant to them and crucial to development. Donor agencies and the UN are realizing that this is very much part of what they do. And information technology is very much in your face — if you read any magazine — it's out there, everywhere. Even my mother knows about the Internet and that's to me the ultimate measure. People are going to start thinking more about this. Everybody is saying 'how do we make choices?' and 'where should we invest?' In coming up with these kinds of policies and choices, scenarios are useful. So I think that as this issue of how one can use information technology for development increases in visibility, people will look for tools and I think this book will be one.

It seems fitting for a book on information technology to be downloadable.

We've put the whole book up on our [web site](#). But there is a value in having it on paper in a convenient format. As I say to my friends, I'm a big believer in electronic communication but I will not take my lap top into my bathtub.

Robert Valantin is Chief Scientist responsible for the information and communication research program at IDRC. Mr Valantin has worked with IDRC since 1976 and, from 1980 and 1983, ran a private consulting firm specializing in computer and information systems feasibility, design, and implementation activities. Mr Valantin is also director of Acacia, a major IDRC initiative involving information and communication technologies and communities in sub-Saharan Africa. E-mail: Rvalantin@idrc.ca

Links to explore ...

- [Development and the Information Age: Four Global Scenarios for the Future of Information and Communication Technology](#), edited by John Howkins and Robert Valantin.
 - [Information and Communication](#). An IDRC research theme.
 - [The Acacia Initiative -- Communities and the Information Society in Africa](#). A short description of the IDRC Program Initiative that aims to empower sub-Saharan African communities with the ability to apply information and communication technologies to their own social and economic development.
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JANUARY-DECEMBER 1997

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 3 January | <i>Reviewing science policy reforms in China</i> by Patrick Kavanagh |
| 10 January | <i>Greening of Tumkur</i> by Deepak Thapa |
| 17 January | <i>Protecting coral reefs : eco - fishing in the Philippines</i> by Patrik Hunt |
| 24 January | <i>Preventing blindness : vitamin - A fortified ultra rice</i> by Keane Shore |
| 31 January | <i>Globalization of Brazil : two sides of the economic miracle</i> by Pierre Beaudet |
| 7 February | <i>Women living under Muslim laws : a solidarity, information, and research network</i>
by Michel Groulx |
| 14 February | <i>Debt management software for Francophone countries</i> by Antoine Raffoul |
| 21 February | <i>Value of trees</i> by Jennifer Pepall |
| 28 February | <i>Saving the United Nations : a global tax on international financial transactions?</i>
by Stephen Dale |
| 7 March | <i>Protecting the Mexican environment : the role of economic instruments</i> by Steven Hunt |
| 14 March | <i>Laying the foundations of a democratic Palestine : the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University</i> by Roula el-Raifi |
| 21 March | <i>Seeking sustainability in rural Egypt : linking scientific and indigenous knowledge</i>
by Kirsteen MacLeod |
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| 18 April | <i>Connecting the North : telecommunications links for Canadian aboriginal communities</i>
by Keane Shore |
| 25 April | <i>Housing and urban poverty in Viet Nam</i> by André Lachance |
| 2 May | <i>Improving crop resistance : a new plant breeding technique borrows from the past</i>
by Kevin Conway |
| 9 May | <i>Surviving poverty : common property resources in West Bengal, India</i>
by Richard Littlemore |
| 16 May | <i>Mercury contamination in the Amazon</i> by Jennifer Pepall |
| 23 May | <i>AIDS in Uganda : understanding the causes of high risk sexual behavior</i>
by Anna Borzello |

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